Grades & narrative evaluations

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A

C+

B−
Alternatives or additions to grades

• The narrative evaluation
  – A written summary of performance in the class
  – A critical review for improvement and assessment

• Alternative or complementary to grades
Schools using narrative evaluations

- New College of Florida, 1960, 750 students
- Fairhaven College of WWU, 1967, 400 students
- Hampshire College, 1965, 1350 students
- The Evergreen State College, 1971, 4500 students
- Bennington College, 1925, 671 students
- University of California, Santa Cruz, 1965, 15,000 students
- Sarah Lawrence College, 1926, 1,260 students
- St. John's College, 1696, 900 students
- Antioch College, 1852, 500 students
- Other schools have some form of pass/fail, grade and narrative evaluation system in place for a portion of their curriculum.

1 in 2000 American undergraduates earns only evaluations

2000 US census, data reported by schools
## Pros and cons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits</th>
<th>Drawbacks</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Learning for its own sake</td>
<td>• Time consuming</td>
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<td>• More feedback</td>
<td>• More costly to administer</td>
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<td>• Explore new subjects</td>
<td>• Not good for large classes</td>
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<td>• Attracts the self-motivated</td>
<td>• Not universally accepted</td>
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<td>• No grade inflation</td>
<td>• Difficult to evaluate overall performance</td>
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<td>• Scholarly engagement</td>
<td>• Results depend on student quality</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Improvement</td>
<td></td>
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<td>• Students can fail</td>
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No carrot or stick?

- Work is done for personal learning
- Social norms encourage “extra learning”
- Evaluations are very important
- All a student has is a reputation
  - Among students
  - Among faculty
But how do you get into …?

- Recommendations
- Standardized tests
- Work experience and research
- Good essays
- The reputation of the school’s graduates
“You did a satisfactory job on the first exam. You did well on questions involving protein folding, primary structure determination, and the relationship between $\Delta G$ and pKa. You could improve on your knowledge of amino acid charges, properties and pKa’s, compensating mutations, protons and buffering, and allosteric binding.”
Using narrative evaluations

• Can be used at any school to supplement student learning

• Know your audience: student vs. employer
  1. Assess each assignment
  2. Form a summary
  3. Organize
# General forms

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Developmental</th>
<th>Project</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Most common</td>
<td>• Student as learner and their growth</td>
<td>• Uses 1 or more projects as a demonstration of how student thinks and what was accomplished</td>
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## Common elements:
1. course description
2. learning objectives
3. summary paragraph
Writing useful evaluations

• **Organize.**  Headings and structure let students know what you are evaluating.

• **Be specific.**  Cite examples and critique performance after giving an overall summary of performance.

• **Make suggestions.**  Tell the student how to improve their weaknesses.